Review Essay:

But where are the metaphysics? Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club: A story of ideas in America*.

(Editor's note: This essay first appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* 26 July 2002 and is reprinted with the kind permission of Bruce Wilshire and Maren Meinhardt and Toby Lichtig the TLS).

A study of American pragmatism cuts ideas back to their roots, in *The Metaphysical Club*, Louis Menand aims to give us an enlightening account of the ideas of four American philosophers—Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr, William James, Charles Peirce and John Dewey—the first three of whom were, in the early 1870s, members of a club at Harvard that they called the "Metaphysical Club". His book might have been subtitled "For readers not much interested in metaphysics", though, for instead of an account of these philosophers' ideas, what we get mainly is a charming and generally well-informed description of the social and personal circumstances which surrounded their thinking, and from which, in a sense, it emerged. This is ironic, even perverse, for a pivotal point made by these pragmatists is that ideas are mutilated if reduced to the circumstances from which they emerge. "Look from roots to fruits", as William James put it. More tellingly still, in his sparse references to "the spiritual" in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James defines it negatively as the refusal to reduce ideas merely to their genesis in experience. "The life of the mind" is a "spiritual" matter. Though not divorced from circumstances, ideas have a life of their own, if you will. To fail to explore the horizons that ideas open up, to fail to follow up on what they prophesy for our conduct and our thinking and our lives, is to fail to explore the ideas.

Menand first gives cause for alarm in his preface: he says he is writing a history of ideas rather than entering into philosophical arguments about the ideas. But the distinction is specious. For how can one grasp what the ideas are without entering into the arguments in which the ideas are presented, and the arguments by which they are to be understood and evaluated? Typically Menand gives us histories of the names of ideas, ie, "pragmatism" -but not
of the ideas named: histories of how these names were used in certain circumstances. Or he gives us the philosophers' summations of their views, not the arguments and references in experience in which the ideas are articulated.

Ideas can be called "tools" (or "teleological instruments"). This is what James and Dewey called them, and it is not an obviously bad metaphor. But it is a metaphor none the less, and not to make this clear is greatly to mislead. For the difference between ideas as "tools" and literal tools is obvious. A tool can be left in the toolbox: it has a reality independent of whoever uses it. But even if one is only trying out an idea without strictly believing in it, the idea is a tendency for the one who thinks it to act in a certain way. Ideas take over one's being, to various degrees. Passionately believed ideas animate their believers to the bottom of their being.

If we are to assess the role and reality of ideas effectively, their meaning and truth, we need to develop a world view or a metaphysics. We must try to grasp how things, in the most general sense, hang together. But The Metaphysical Club does not help us achieve this, and for many readers it will be positively distracting. For Menand's limpid historical account of the circumstances in which the ideas are supposed to have emerged gives the impression that he is giving us an account of the ideas. And yet he is not.

Menand opens his account of the four thinkers with Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr, and of the four, Holmes most nearly supports Menand's general approach. If a single idea underpins Holmes's thinking life, it is that all ideas are greatly imperfect and limited, and this can be traced fairly directly to his personal, social and familial circumstances. He is the son of the famous Dr Oliver Wendell Holmes, the author of Autocrat of the Breakfast Table (1858), well known for his wit as well as for his pontifications. His hideous experiences in the Civil War, when he was seriously wounded three times, and witnessed the deaths or mutilations of his friends, caused him to disbelieve most of the ideas and principles in terms of which the carnage was framed and supported—or opposed.

Holmes Jr went on to serve many years as a Justice of the US Supreme Court, stalwart into his nineties in his distrust of ideas and of all principles facilely applied.
As Menand relates, he would challenge his colleagues on the Court to name a legal principle. When they did, he would use it to defend both the pro and the con in any issue that might come before them.

Holmes Jr is a pragmatist, but in a particularly restricted sense. If there is a single just decision, he believes, it is the one that "works" in whatever particular concrete case and context that is at hand—"works" to satisfy the greatest number of demands made by our intuition, perception, common sense, or reason—legal and otherwise. Thus he said that a ruling idea is that the Court must in every case come to some decision. The docket must be cleared: the just decision is the one that is least objectionable in view of the vast, typically unencompassable scope of possibly relevant considerations.

If Holmes is a pragmatist in a sense, he is also a positivist in the full sense. That is, he is a thinker who draws a sharp distinction between facts and values, and believes that only solid, empirical facts are reliably objective and knowable. Holmes suspects that all high-sounding ideas and principles are merely reifications of words. Take "rights". A right to X is really only a prediction about what will turn out to be a crude fact. It is a prediction that the courts and the police will do such and such to prevent other parties from interfering with what one takes to be one's right to X. In this Holmes undoubtedly was influenced by another member of the Metaphysical Club, the brilliant and unhappy positivist Chauncey Wright.

Menand turns next to William James, who, with Peirce and Dewey, spent his whole life formulating and "following out" ideas—experimenting with them, groping and conversing and ruminating about them. With the partial exception of Dewey, none of them was a public figure in the way Holmes was. None of them fought in a hideous war, none of them contended with a Boston Brahmin father like Dr Holmes. Each was a philosopher in the full sense of the word, each took metaphysical positions, implicitly and explicitly.

Here Menand's failure to grasp the purport and consequences of distinctively philosophical ideas becomes damagingly clear. What is the meaning of truth, persons, groups, reality, matter, mind, the meaning of meaning itself, the meaning of "pragmatism" itself? James's
pragmatic theories of meaning and truth depend on his metaphysics of radical empiricism or pure experience, but references to this metaphysics are absent in Menand, and so James's pragmatism cannot be grasped. Neither can Dewey's, nor Peirce's.

Without philosophy 101 already under one's belt, Menand's informed and charming descriptions of personal, social, scientific and geographical circumstances mislead. Take his lengthy discussion of the controversies swirling around Darwin's evolutionary theories. Evolution is a pivotal topic, to be sure (Dewey wrote a paper called "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy"), but Menand oversimplifies disastrously. The difficulty is his original one. What is the force of "evolution" when we assume that philosophical ideas emerge from the circumstances that surround their enunciation? Or what amounts to the same, what is the force of the ancient and key term "cause"—as in "circumstances cause ideas"?

Menand offers a simplistic alternative: evolutionists know that configurations of matter cause ideas, anti-evolutionists don't and assert the reverse: that ideas cause matter. But he doesn't grasp that the word "cause" (or "emerge") is radically ambiguous. There are productive causes, and there are what came to be called formal causes. The former include the circumstances surrounding anything and necessary for its production or emergence. The latter, formal causes, are a matter of what the thing is, and this cannot be determined solely by the circumstances necessary for its bare being. There can be an indefinite number of productive causes of the same sort of effect. For example, there can be an indefinite number of ways of producing (causing in the first sense) a pair of anything: splitting something, bringing two things of the same sort together, cupping one's hands and having two somethings-or-other fall out of the sky into them, and so on. But what causes (in the second sense) any pair to be what it is, a pair, is just the abiding form Two, or Twoness.

Thus the great question left open by evolutionary theories of all kinds: "Granted, these are circumstances necessary for the emergence of this sort of thing, but what is it?" There may be overlap in the senses of cause in answering the question, but some distinction between the senses must be made, or there will be massive reduction of meaning and massive misunderstanding. The circumstances in
which ideas emerge, or out of which they are produced, are not sufficient to determine what they are, what they mean. And this is particularly so in the case of "pragmatism", which holds that ideas are simply their envisaged consequences for experience. How they are envisaged is a function of how we feel and conceive the world in which we are placed and in which our projects and interests are understandable to ourselves and to others. We presuppose a world view, a metaphysics.

Towards the end of The Metaphysical Club, in "Pragmatisms", the most philosophical chapter in the book, Menand speaks of the defects of turn-of-the-century pragmatism. He concludes with these sentences:

One is that it takes interests for granted; it doesn't provide for a way of judging whether they are worth pursuing apart from the consequences of acting on them. We form beliefs to get what we want, but where do we get our wants? . . . The second deficiency is related to the first. It is that wants and beliefs can lead people to act in ways that are distinctly unpragmatic. Sometimes the results are destructive, but sometimes they are not. There is a sense in which history is lit by the deeds of men and women for whom ideas were things other than instruments of adjustment. Pragmatism explains everything about ideas except why a person would be willing to die for one.

Behind criticisms so egregiously wrong lie grave mistakes. Menand fails to examine pragmatic theories of meaning and truth within the metaphysical framework actually fashioned and employed by the thinkers. Again we see his historian's emphasis on the circumstances surrounding the emergence of our wants. But what are these wants? No answer to the question of whether they are "worth pursuing" can approach adequacy without considering the "consequences of acting on them"! That is the pragmatic theory of meaning. The pragmatist's position, contrary to the positivist's, is that fact and value cannot be severed. Even barely to notice something is to find it minimally interesting and valuable, given our interest in surviving and, with luck, thriving.

And pragmatism goes further. It takes it that all ideas must involve ideals. That is, for an idea to be meaningful -that is, for it to be applicable to any
situation and to its constraints and opportunities—it must project certain standards that are to be met, certain expected consequences of applying the idea, certain ideal consequences.

Menand claims that, for pragmatism, ideas are merely "instruments" by which organisms adjust to environments. But this is not true. Pragmatists acknowledge that committing oneself to an idea, and to its implicit ideal, may lead to one's death; ideas are hardly mere "instruments of adjustment". In James's first important philosophical article, "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence", he strenuously objects to Spencer's evolutionist definition of mind as that which corresponds to an outer environment in a way that enables the minded organism to survive. For the behaviour involved in true ideas may lead to the organism's death. The behaviour involved in false ones may allow the organism to survive. James fairly shouts the old slogan "Let justice be done though the world perish". In another place he writes, "There is something wild and heroic at the heart of us." With some frequency, people die for their ideas and ideals, and that is as much a fact as anything is. What pragmatism holds is that true ideas are those which "work" best in the long run to fulfil humanity's total needs and aspirations, those which best navigate us through a chancy world.

Charles Peirce has his own particular take on this. Having been a working natural scientist (and mathematician and logician) all his life, he is especially concerned with articulating scientific truth pragmatically. He speaks of the truth as that which qualified inquirers and experimenters are destined to arrive at if they inquire long enough, and the meaning he gives to "destined" can be cashed only within a presupposed metaphysics which is distinctly organismic, not dualistic and mechanistic, a world view in which to speak of "the grain" of the universe is a helpful metaphor. John Dewey furthers this organismic tradition, most obviously when he both connects and distinguishes the desired and the desirable.

Contrary to Menand, pragmatists think as if our lives as members of humanity depend on the achievement of truth, and this depends on what we do cooperatively, how we augment or correct each other's perspectives. Reasoning, Peirce writes,
inexorably requires that our interests shall not be limited. They must not stop at our own fate, but must embrace the whole community . . . . He who would not sacrifice his own soul to save the whole world, is, as it seems to me, illogical in his inferences, collectively. Logic is rooted in the social principle.

This is cited by Menand himself, but he apparently forgets it, and instead perpetuates the stales misunderstandings of pragmatism. He projects on to pragmatism a metaphysics foreign to it -the metaphysics of the psychological/physical, mind/matter, subject/object, knower/known dualism. He also projects a Procrustean metaphysics of mechanistic linearity -causes produce effects, which become causes that produce effects, and on and on -and the meaning of "cause" and "effect" is left pinched and impoverished. He claims that pragmatism eschews "representationalist" or "correspondence" theories of meaning and truth, but he does not reveal the meaning of these terms, or the meaning of the terms that should be used to make sense of things and of ourselves.

Contemporary analytic philosophy is highly insular, highly professionalized. Nevertheless it contributes its share to the Zeitgeist that enwraps Menand and so many others. I mean the attitude of perpetual (presumptive) detachment from the encompassing and pervading world: as if one were always experiencing things through some scientific instrument or other. Correspondence or representationalist theories of meaning and truth now seem completely natural, the only conceivable game in town. We look out coolly at the "external" world and try to fix the references of our terms. Truth is a matter of the correspondence of statements (or propositions) in the mind (or in language) to states of affairs in the world. Analytic philosophers assume what is so convenient for them to assume: that propositions are ambiguous, that they hover between "the inside and the outside", that they straddle the mental and the physical "domains", that they bridge the "chasm" of mind and matter, and subject and object. So they suppose that truth just is a property of propositions that correspond to what they purport to be about.

Profoundly influenced by Cartesian dualism and formal logic, analytic philosophy—together with the pervasive attitude of scientism—hides away the metaphysics of
pragmatism, a metaphysics of profound involvement and intimacy. It is hidden and the hiding is hidden. Peirce argued that philosophy's first job is simultaneously to dismantle Cartesian dualism and to construct a reliable phenomenology of the experienced and experienceable world. The two tasks come to the same thing. For Descartes (and the British empiricists who followed in his wake) does not describe the experienced world as it presents itself immediately to us as a phenomenon, that is, as a seamless but at any given moment mostly blurry whole. Unwittingly, he smuggles in an analysis of "experience" into discrete mental data, for example, "sense data". As all the American pragmatists agree, "sense data" are not the building blocks of knowledge, but the fruits of an analysis that forgets itself.

Without a grasp of the pragmatists' phenomenologies, there is no grasp of their metaphysics. For the basic structures that the immediately experienced world must exhibit if it is to be an experienced world at all are "categories" structures so basic that they inform every conceivable experience of anything in the world, or any conceivable constellation of phenomena that amounts to "world". Menand misses the phenomenology, and so misses the metaphysics. He gets caught up in the latest winds of doctrine -for example, "post-structuralism" -that blow through American university English departments. We hear that everything is a text, "that there is no escape from the dictionary". But that is not true for Peirce (nor Dewey nor James). For Peirce, there is always present in every experience a huge fund that gets categorized as "secondness". Peirce gives a vivid and focal example: "running into a post blindfolded". We experience a sheer that, a sheer resistance, or maybe a sheer support. It might be a that ready to become all kinds of whats, or it may just leave us stunned, transfixed and mute.

James's metaphysics is even more non-dualistic and organismic than Peirce's. It grasps the intimacy and fusedness of persons and world with dazzling freshness and incisiveness. Yes, there is some distinction to be made between experiencing and the experienced, but it is not the Cartesian dualistic one. The very properties or "specific natures" that constitute the reality of something experienced in the world also constitute, in various changing arrangements, the reality of the person experiencing it. Say we embrace a person we love. The
warmth and living mass of the person embraced that go to constituting that person's reality through time also go to constituting our reality as the perceiver and experiencer of that person. This is what is so hard to grasp intellectually, for today we tend to divide knower radically from known, experiencing from experienced.

Only in such a world—a world primally presented and not represented—do the pragmatic theories of meaning and truth make sense. James sets out the metaphysical basis of his theory of truth in his article "A World of Pure Experience". Truth grasped in direct perception may be one "piece" of "pure experience" which can retrospectively be seen to participate in two contexts at once (the experiencing and the experienced). Truth in another situation may be the reliable progression in our experiencing from one pure experience to another. Finally, truth in situations remote from direct experiencing and "following out" is what would lead to the thing thought about if we could follow it out. Before a believing in a believed is confirmed as true, it is true "virtually" (and pragmatically) because it is the only answer that can consistently be given, once the question about the believed is asked. Looked at from one point of view, truth is made; looked at from another, truth is discovered. "The World of Pure Experience" is understandable only in perspectivalist and relativistic ways.

There is an ideal element in this metaphysics and theory of truth (a true idea about something is that which would lead us to what the idea purports to be about), but it is not an ideal floating in the blue. It is an ideal grounded in the "grain" of the world, the experienced and experienceable world's tendencies to develop in certain ways, manners, connections, and not in others. Some beliefs, perhaps inarticulable, "work"; others do not. These others do not lead us, but mislead us. Pragmatic theories of meaning and truth reground us in the actual "thingy" world.

Ideas and ideals are tools, in a sense. But they have a life of their own, and they possess us in ways that literal tools typically do not. It is all very well for Menand to cite Dewey comparing an idea or a belief to a fork, and then to add: Do we really have to ask why the fork "fits" the piece of meat and not the soup? But without
excavating the metaphysics at work, the insight is vastly over-simplified.

It would be nice to say that The Metaphysical Club is on balance worth having. Menand provides interesting and valuable historical knowledge often overlooked by "pure" philosophers, touching on important thinkers such as Chauncey Wright, Horace Kallen, Alain Locke, Randolph Bourne, W. E. B. Du Bois, Arthur Bentley, Edward Ross, Learned Hand and many others. But I cannot say this nice thing. Menand's valuable information about the circumstances surrounding the emergence of ideas will badly mislead unless one already knows quite a bit about the ideas themselves. It is not safe to assume that even many learned, educated, or inquiring people possess this knowledge and discipline.

Still, for readers who bring with them an understanding of the ideas about which Louis Menand writes, his book can be helpful. It can assist them in filling out the context within which these "contextualists'" ideas are to be better understood.

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